

The Troubled Jews of Argentina

Agostino Bono

CHRIST WAS KILLED BY JEWS

The Jews are "indigestible" to national society.

Jews do not integrate well.

THE CUSTOMS, RELIGION, AND TRADITIONS OF JEWS ARE INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE CHRISTIAN AND OCCIDENTAL WAYS OF THE MAJORITY.

As Zionists, the allegiance of Jews to Israel makes it impossible for them to be truly patriotic in another country.

These ideas, if prominently expressed in the United States, would draw loud protests. In Argentina, which has the second largest Jewish population in the Western Hemisphere, they stir little critical comment. This is not a speculative judgment but a fact, for these sentiments, illustrated with photos of dollar bills and Argentine coins, appeared in a lengthy editorial article by the progovernment *Carta Politica* (Political Letter), one of Argentina's most respected and influential monthly magazines in June of this year.

The Jewish population in Argentina numbers between 300,000 and 400,000, and the thesis of Jewish nonintegration is false, but the article drew only limited protest in the small-circulation Jewish press. Yet many Jews are privately worried. They see the article as a subtler form of the blatant anti-Semitism that has punctuated Argentine history since the Spanish colonial Inquisition.

Jews have integrated well and made important contributions in Argentina. Farm cooperatives—currently an important economic structure in this rich agrarian and cattle country—were introduced by Jewish immigrants. Mikhail Najdorf, a naturalized Argentine who arrived from Poland at the start of World War II, is one of the world's leading chess players, representing Argentina at international tournaments. Numerous Jewish-Argentines have won top national and Hispanic literary awards. Others are key figures in the Latin American academic world of mathematics, linguistics, and the social sciences.

Jews evolved socio-economically along the same patterns as the majority of the 25 million Argentines, also immigrants. Most began as poor farmers, saving money to send their children to the big cities for higher

education in the hope of making life easier for their offspring. Once in an urban environment, the new generation tended to remain. Now most of the Jewish population is urban-dwelling, middle-class, and earns its living as merchants, white-collar workers, and in the professions. The overwhelming majority lives in Buenos Aires, the capital. Although no statistics are available, Jewish historians say mixed marriages are increasing significantly among the younger generations, with some adopting Catholicism, the majority religion. The situation allows those with Latin surnames to hide their Jewish ancestry if they wish to increase their upward social mobility.

Politically, some Jews are members of leftist guerrilla groups that sprang up in the 1960's and that, at present, are being methodically destroyed by the military government. Others proudly proclaim their admiration for the more hawkish right-wing generals. Most, like the population at large, are moderates to conservative. They favor a defeat of the guerrillas, but express growing concern that arbitrary military action is causing many innocent people to be killed, kidnapped, and thrown into jail without charges. They are, in these respects, like the rest of the citizenry.

All this may be too much integration, warn some Jewish community leaders, worried that the result is assimilation at the expense of Jewish identity and culture. "We must, once and for all, state unequivocally that the main problem is the frightening disappearance of Jewish content and feeling. This is the common denominator of the vast majority of our Jews," complains *Mundo Israelita* (Israelite World), the Spanish-language Jewish weekly of Buenos Aires.

Why then are Jews considered "historically indigestible" in Argentina? The most frequent answer given is that Argentina is not a pluralistic society. "Pluralism is considered to be disintegrating," says Paul Warszawski, official of the World Jewish Congress office in Buenos Aires.

The pillars of this monolithic society are a rigid, authoritarian, and highly nationalistic Catholicism inherited from Spanish colonialism, and a politically oriented military that regards itself as the protector of the nation's Western Christian traditions.

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Like the U.S., Argentina is an immigrant nation. Unlike the U.S., Argentine immigration has reinforced the monolithic structure rather than stimulating pluralism. Most Argentine immigrants come from Spain and Italy, which share a common conservative Catholicism and Latin traditions. The languages are close enough to have been melded. Although the official tongue is Spanish, the vernacular is heavily mixed with Italian pronunciations and words. "In the U.S. minorities are like an orchestra. When they all play together, it sounds good. No one asks the violinist to give up his violin," says Jorge M. Rudman, director of the Argentine Zionist Organization. And he adds: "Here people talk of a melting pot of ethnic groups in which minorities have to lose their characteristics to become Argentines." (The Jews "are a resistant minority," complains the anonymously written *Carta Politica* article.)

Key aspects of this monolithic structure are ingrained. Freedom of religion is allowed, but Catholicism is the state religion. Not only does the president have to be a practicing Catholic, but also Holy, Roman, and Apostolic. The final arbiter in politics is the military, which, when in power, often overrules the constitution. Jewish "resistance" makes Jews easy scapegoats for the periodic political and economic frustrations of the general population. At the same time, Jewish leaders note that Argentina has opened its doors to Jewish immigrants fleeing East European pogroms and Nazi persecution. "Personally, I have never experienced anything resembling anti-Semitism," says José Isaacson, poet and essayist. "My country has distinguished me with the highest laurels it grants a writer."

Massive Jewish immigration was stimulated almost a century ago by a Holy, Roman, and Apostolic Catholic government headed by a popularly elected, rough-and-tumble army general, Julio A. Roca (1880-86). Even before Roca took office Argentina was promoting massive immigration from Spain and Italy to colonize its sparsely populated rural areas. The geographically large nation had under three million inhabitants at the time. When news of the Russian pogroms reached Argentina, the government, on August 19, 1881, created a special immigration office "to direct toward the Argentine Republic Israeli immigration from the Russian Empire." This was later extended to include Eastern Europe. Argentina had about 1,500 Jews when massive immigration started. Most of these earlier arrivals traced their ancestry to Spanish Jews forced to leave the Iberian peninsula after the 1492 expulsion order.

The colonial experience produced tender examples of understanding and cooperation among Jewish immigrants and their Argentine hosts. "I remember that the colonists practically lived side-by-side with the gaucho [native Argentine cowboy]. It was a *de facto* brotherhood with no hostile feelings," relates Maximo Yagupsky, leading Jewish-Argentine journalist born in one of the early immigrant colonies. Many gauchos learned Yiddish and became interested in Jewish religious customs. Yagupsky tells how his Argentine neighbor, Manuel del Pozo, used to come every Friday

evening to hear the Sabbath blessing and was disappointed once to learn the blessing would not be said because Yagupsky's father was away.

"Give me a cup of wine," said del Pozo."

"We gave him a cup and he said the entire Sabbath blessing in Hebrew from memory. And when he left, he told us 'gut shabes' [Yiddish for good sabbath]," relates Yagupsky.

The colonial experience also produced *Los Gauchos Judio* (The Jewish Gauchos) by Alberto Gerchunoff, considered a classic of Argentine literature. Gerchunoff arrived when he was a year old and spent his youth in colony life.

The colonization period was also filled with hardships for the poor, non-Spanish-speaking immigrants. The first major contingent, 824 Jews from Russia, arrived August 24, 1889, on the *S.S. Weser* to find hard times were not over. Before arriving they were subjected to economic exploitation. With help from a Paris Jewish immigration agency, the *Weser* group bought land from J. B. Frank, a Jew representing a private Argentine colonization organization. Upon arrival the immigrants discovered the land had already been sold.

The desperate colonists received compassion and aid from the small, well-organized Buenos Aires Jewish community and were put in touch with Pedro Palacios, a rich Argentine rancher willing to sell land from his large holdings northwest of Buenos Aires. Palacios charged over four times the going price and about four times contemporary interest rates over the six-year repayment period.

When the train left the colonists at Palacios station, they found no transportation to take them to their land, still a long way off. All they found was bare land with no temporary housing, food, or medicines. Palacios was responsible for providing transportation and basic necessities. The immigrants huddled in old railway cars abandoned along the tracks. Their food was whatever they could beg from passing trains, relying on waiters to save them dining car leftovers.

After visiting the area Wilhelm Loewenthal complained to government authorities: "For about six weeks some 500 immigrants have been living in horrible misery at Palacios station, often having less to eat than a piece of cracker per person during 48 hours. Many are sick, and 61 children have died. Others are in the throes of death, without medical assistance and medicines." Loewenthal, a Jewish-Rumanian and a doctor by profession, was investigating Argentina's possibilities for Jewish immigration. He also received Palacios's promise to provide temporary assistance until transportation was arranged to take the colonists to their land. After passing through this desert of hardships, the immigrants named their colony Moisesville, after Moses.

Shocked by his experience, Loewenthal returned to Europe and contacted German-born Baron Maurice de Hirsch, who was interested in helping Jews persecuted in Russia. Loewenthal convinced Hirsch to found the Jewish Colonization Association to provide necessary financial and material aid for Jewish immigrants to

Argentina. The organization was founded on August 14, 1891. Headed by Loewenthal, it became the major vehicle for settling immigrants. One of its first acts was to assume sponsorship of Moisesville. Lucienville, another association colony, formed Argentina's first agrarian cooperative in 1900.

With the hard-working colonists arrived what became known in the Jewish community as the "unclean"—white slave traders, mostly from the East European Jewish underworld—who were attracted by the predominance of male immigrants. "Also traveling were two young Jews from Russia together with their wives, who came from London. Great was our shock upon learning they had sold their wives! Such events occur every day here," wrote an immigrant to an East European Jewish newspaper in 1890.

The same phenomenon occurred among other immigrating ethnic groups, fostering a powerful, bribery-skilled underworld of "ruffians." Among the Jews the battle between the "unclean" and the established organizations was long and hard. The "unclean" sneaked into immigrant receiving centers, attempting to gain new members by telling exaggerated stories of colonization hardships. The "unclean" were barred from all Jewish community organizations, including attendance at the Hebrew theatre. They had to form their own organizations and even established their own cemetery. In 1930 the government cracked down on the entire "ruffian" society, forcing disbandment. Jewish immigration continued through the 1920's, reaching its peaks in 1906 and 1912 with thirteen thousand immigrants each year. Immigration officially ended in the 1930's, but the doors were kept partially opened to allow entrance of Jews fleeing Nazi persecution.

Many Argentine Jews say that the many tender anecdotes and the personal friendships established across ethnic lines mean that anti-Semitism is not native to Argentina, but something imported from the various brands of European nationalism. Argentine anti-Semites are considered a minority, in contrast to the large list of prominent cultural and political figures protesting discrimination against Jews. Others say the seeds of anti-Semitism were here, the imported ideas serving as fertilizer. Whether imported or not, anti-Semitism is like a serpent winding its way along the trunk of Argentine history. Comprehension and hatred exist side by side. For example, the 824 state-encouraged Jewish immigrants who arrived on the *Weser* in 1889 were prevented from disembarking for two days by a port inspector, Carlos Lix Klett, who considered them "dangerous" to national life. Klett kept them aboard until overruled by the immigration commission. And another example: Anti-Semitic groups periodically attain political power and influence, allowing them to operate in the name of the state and with impunity.

Jewish persecution in what is now Argentina started under church and state patronage with the Spanish conquest. Although the headquarters of the colonial Inquisition was in Lima, Peru, permanent commissioners operated in Argentina to ferret out people secretly

practicing Jewish rites. A 1623 Inquisition edict commanded people to "denounce to us if you have heard of any people who keep holy Saturdays in observance of the law of Moses" and who "recite Jewish prayers." The telltale signs to look for are use of "clean shirts," "clean table linens," and "clean sheets" on Saturdays. Several Argentine residents were convicted by inquisitorial courts, condemned to prison or burned at the stake. All had their property confiscated.

The Inquisition was abolished in Argentina on March 24, 1813, three years after the nation declared independence from the Spanish viceroy, but legal restrictions against Jewish religious practices remained. The 1853 Constitution was the first legal basis for Jewish life, with a 1860 Supreme Court decision needed to allow the nation's first Jewish wedding ceremony to take place. The landmark ruling said a non-Catholic religious rite could take place in Argentina.

The 1881 government decree allowing immigration from Russia was hardly off the press when a French-language Buenos Aires newspaper called Jews "insects, parasites and leeches." "Jewish immigration is neither hard-working, industrious nor productive. And for these reasons the Jews have no homeland," editorialized *L'Union Française*.

The worst physical violence occurred the week of January 6, 1919, and is called a pogrom by the Jewish-Argentine community. For several nights police and right-wing gangs ran roughshod throughout the Buenos Aires Jewish sector. Jews were beaten and arrested. Property was destroyed and stolen. A first-hand witness, José Mendelsohn, reported: "Horseback riders dragged naked, old Jews along the streets of Buenos Aires, pulling their gray and white beards. Their skin tore against the cobblestones as they couldn't keep up with the rhythm of the horses while the sabers and whips of the riders intermittently struck their bodies."

Arrested Jews were beaten, tortured, and, in one police station, their mouths were used as urinals, Mendelsohn relates. A young immigrant at the time, Mendelsohn later became a leading Jewish-Argentine intellectual.

The pogrom was one event in what has become known in Argentine history as the Week of Tragedy, a brutal repression of striking metallurgy workers by police and right-wing goon squads. Most of the violence was against the strikers, with the pogrom a side dish.

The number of Jewish Marxists and Socialists was small in proportion to the whole, but this was enough to taint the entire community in the eyes of the upper-class power structure, fearful that they were witnessing the beginning stages of a major social revolution. The fear spread that the Jews, mostly of Russian origin, were planning a Soviet-style takeover and had instigated the strikers. Pedro Wald, a thirty-year-old carpenter and member of a Jewish Socialist group, was arrested and accused of plotting to become the first Soviet president of Argentina. The pogrom resulted in one death and seventy-one wounded. The nationwide worker repression caused around seven hundred deaths and probably included many other Jews, since the contemporary urban residents were basically working class.

The serpentine anti-Semitism blended readily with European fascism. Until the beginning of World War II, the Argentine army was trained by Prussians. As a neutral country, Argentina received a steady flow of agents from Nazi Germany looking for a Latin American base. Army General Juan Domingo Perón, dictatorial president from 1946 to 1955 and elected again in 1973, was an open admirer of fascism. His Argentina became a haven for Nazis fleeing Europe after the war. During both Peronist governments Jews were sacked in disproportionate numbers from state universities, hospitals, and agencies. The military government of General Juan C. Onganía (1966-70) was influenced by admirers of Hitler and followers of an Opus Dei-style Catholicism.

Although no pogroms have occurred in recent years, there have been periodic midnight bombings, target practice against Jewish businesses, and an avalanche of virulent anti-Semitic literature readily available at newsstands. The stories range from supposed plots to create a second Jewish state in southern Argentina to charges that the Jews are responsible for Argentina's economic pitfalls. The present military government, which overthrew the Peronists on March 24, 1976, publicly repudiates anti-Semitism, but does little to prevent it. The government completely prohibits leftist propaganda, but Nazi-style hate literature is only occasionally banned. Bombings are not investigated seriously, and the perpetrators are never caught.

Many Jewish leaders agree privately that government officials oppose anti-Semitism, but say that it exists in sectors of the police and military at a time when the government cannot afford deep divisions because of its self-styled "dirty war" against the guerrillas. Publicly, however, Jews avoid strong criticism and say anti-Semitism is exaggerated as a problem. The Delegation of Israeli Associations in Argentina, the antidefamation watchdog agency, barks loudly within the community and catalogues impressive evidence of anti-Semitism, but slips on a muzzle when approached for public comment, especially from foreign journalists. During a recent heavy wave of anti-Semitic activities, a Delegation official told me his organization would publicly deny having spoken to me if cited as a source.

The present situation makes the Jewish community decidedly uneasy. The American Jewish Committee closed its Buenos Aires office in July, 1977, after its Argentine director received death threats. When Jewish surnames appear in a bad public light, anti-Semitic outbreaks often follow. After the government accused a Jewish banker of having financial dealings with guerrillas, a right-wing Catholic publication asked the military to purge Jews from state jobs and national life.

Many Jewish organizations have buildings with thick, bomb-proof doors. A visitor to the Argentine Zionist Organization is placed in a small room, frisked with a metal detector, and his clothes examined. Passing the test qualifies one to be told by an official that anti-Semitism is a minor problem and that the precautions are merely "preventive medicine." "You can criticize

anti-Semitism in the U.S. because no one will come knocking on your door in the middle of the night," explained a well-known Jew, who requested anonymity.

This uneasiness, plus worry that apathy and assimilation are erasing Jewish culture, is causing reevaluation of Jewish life in Argentina. "We haven't found the forms yet for developing Jewish life in Argentina's monolithic society," says one Jewish writer.

Because of the historical restrictions on Jewish religious practices and the lack of rabbis to meet the needs of the far-flung immigrant colonies, Jewish community life has developed around secular organizations. Following East European structures, they are heavily Orthodox, strongly Zionist, and provide educational, cultural, political, and recreational services. Today, this secular inheritance means few Jews practice their religion.

"In the fifty-odd synagogues in Buenos Aires only about 25,000 people attended the last Yom Kippur services [1976]. Religiously, people here are titular Jews," complains Rabbi Marshall Meyer, a U.S. native who has lived here since 1959. "Fewer people want to be buried in Jewish cemeteries. More say they have no Jewish affiliation, either secular or religious." Memberships have also declined in key secular organizations. The Israeli Mutual Association in Argentina, the largest, has about 38,000 members, down from over 50,000 several years ago.

Rabbi Meyer cites apathy as the reason Jews in Argentina have failed to develop religious leaders. In 1962 he helped establish the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary, located in Buenos Aires, as a center of Conservative Judaism. The seminary currently has about twenty rabbinical students and in 1965 published the first complete Hebrew-Spanish Jewish prayer book since the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Currently, Argentina has about fifteen Orthodox rabbis, four Conservative rabbis, and a Reformed rabbi.

Many nonaffiliated Jews say the apathy stems from outdated community structures and practices such as dividing organization members by the political parties of Israel, causing splits and divisions, especially during elections. They would like to change these practices. Rabbi Meyer sees future possibilities in developing non-Orthodox Judaism, which is more flexible in its religious forms. Secular leaders see hope in greater stress on Jewish education and study of Hebrew. Currently, about fifteen thousand students are enrolled in Hebrew day schools. Some resurgence is being noted, but it is still too early to judge, say community leaders.

The changes that have taken place within the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council have been helpful. Contemporary Catholic anti-Semitism comes from fringe groups that do not represent official church positions, Jewish leaders note. They add that current relations with church leaders are good, including occasional seminars on Judeo-Christian relations and pluralism.

Other sectors of Argentine society, however, remain unbending. Today, Jews are still *de facto* excluded from high posts in such significant national institutions as the judiciary and the army. Bomb-proof doors continue to be necessary for Argentina's "indigestible" Jews.